

A CREATIVE PAINTING EXPLORATION OF RURAL IOWA  
THROUGH THE USE OF SUBJECTIVE REALISM

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by  
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION AND EXPLANATION OF THE PROBLEM

An artist may search for years before he develops a style of painting that is compatible to his personality and one which allows him to best depict his personal ideas and feelings. The subject matter that he uses is that which is most meaningful to him. His statements, if they are to be successful, must be based on a deep personal and emotional involvement with this subject matter. If the artist paints without emotional attachment he may find that the paintings become less meaningful than a casual snapshot of the subject. The style and technique the artist uses in painting must best exhibit his emotions on canvas. As in the case of the artist, Andrew Wyeth, his emotions are deeply rooted in the particular environment in which he lives and his paintings then, in a sense, become statements about his environment.

The writer of this paper grew up in rural Iowa and has lived in this region all of his life. He is constantly reminded of his past by the things that he observes today. Although these sights may recall negative as well as positive feelings they are feelings that are deeply rooted in his past environment. These feelings hold a strong emotional attachment and therefore he uses them as the base of his

subject matter.

The subjects that he sees and depicts today become symbols of his own past and heritage. These subjects also become comments on the people and the environment in which he has lived.

### I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It was the artist's contention that he could, through the use of subject realism, make valid pictorial comments about his own past and about the general environment and culture of the rural Iowa area in which he was raised.

The rural Iowa environment is quite meaningful to the artist because his personality was shaped by it. He feels that this environment is a healthy one and, in this sense, he pays tribute to all of those people who have lived in it and have been shaped by it.

### II. DEFINITION OF "SUBJECTIVE REALISM"

Subjectivism, as a broad definition, would cover the work that virtually all creative artists engage in. Subjectivity demands that the final result of a study will have been influenced by the personality and feelings of the one who makes it. Conversely, objectivity demands that a person must be very impersonal in his dealings with the subject matter, not allowing any personal feelings or emotions to

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influence his final statement. In this sense then, any artist who makes a statement about a personal feeling or idea and allows his emotions to dictate the direction of that statement is subjective.

The term "subjective realism" is not, however, as general in its applications or definition. This particular term refers to a specific style of painting rather than the broad definition inherent in "subjectivism."

Edward Hopper, Thomas Eakins, William Harnett, and Andrew Wyeth are examples of artists who approach their subject matter through a realistic style. The fact that they have responded to some stimuli which evoked certain personal feelings in their paintings is, in the broad definition, subjectivism. However, some of these artists approach their realistic style of painting in an objective manner and others in a subjective manner.

Eakins and Harnett are two who use objective realism in their work. The objects or areas that they paint change little, once on canvas, from the actual subject. They may have been very subjective about their reasons for choosing a particular subject, but the rendering of it was done quite objectively. They saw something that had special meaning for them and so they painted it: subjectivism. They felt, however, that the only way that they could successfully expose those feelings was to render the objects faith-



fully without any personal interpretations: objective realism.

Artists such as Wyeth and Hopper also use a realistic approach to convey their ideas through painting. Their particular style of realism is, however, subjective in nature. They change the people or landscapes that they are painting from in order to better describe their emotions concerning the subject matter. Thus, a Wyeth landscape, though realistic in nature, bears little resemblance to the actual area from which he painted.

### III. METHODS AND THESIS ORGANIZATION

Rather than contrast the thesis paintings with those of an artist whose work is in an opposite direction, the paintings of Andrew Wyeth and his style of subjective realism are used to clarify and support the thesis paintings.

The chapter on Wyeth analyzes his environment and early life in relation to their influence on his later work. It contains a study of two of his major paintings and analyzes how he has used subjective realism to depict his feelings. The chapter also studies the validity that his work holds in terms of its universal application to his viewers. There is also a short contrasting study of Thomas Eakins included to more clearly define the basic differences between the work of a subjective realist (Wyeth) and an

objective realist (Eakins).

The last chapter is an analysis of the thesis paintings. The artist sees himself as a typical product of a rural Iowa environment and through the paintings states that the product developed by the environment, is important to the whole of society and therefore is valid as subject matter. The paintings are, in this sense, a defense of the qualities that are inherent and unique to the rural Iowan.

The artist has explored his memories of his past. He views subjects today which remind him of it and while exploring his own environment he involves in his work a large segment of people from the same area from which he has come. The artist is involved deeply with this work since it is the study of the roots of his heritage. The work takes on validity because the paintings symbolize and explore a unique environment as a whole.

People rather than landscape were used as subject matter. The people have been shaped by the environment in which they live and they become more meaningful in relating to this environment than landscapes.

The artist has experimented for some time with different styles and techniques which would allow him to best describe his feelings and emotions about rural Iowa. He felt that, in subjective realism, he found a very compatible style with which to make these statements and one

which is well suited to the subject matter.

## CHAPTER II

### ANALYSIS OF ANDREW WYETH AND HIS WORK

Chadd's Ford, Pennsylvania is a small hamlet, numbering approximately three hundred residents, located on U. S. Route 1, twenty-five miles west of Philadelphia. In this humble setting, in the picturesque Brandywine River Valley, lives a man who, in the opinion of many authorities, is one of the most important painters in the United States today.<sup>1</sup> Andrew Wyeth has never had to go anywhere else to find inspiration. The rolling hills of the Brandywine Valley are lush and green in the summer, brown and sere in the winter. The homes, some dating back to the Revolution when Washington was fighting the British, are stark and utilitarian. Wyeth and his family now live in a remodeled mill which was one of the war objectives of the British General Howe when he tried to outflank General Washington's troops during the war. The sparseness of the homes and mills reflect the character of the people that built them, and the character of the people that live in them now. The original inhabitants were basically Dutch people of the Amish religious sect, a people whose simple and utilitarian life promoted their industrious nature and direct character, and their

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Gehman, "Andrew Wyeth," Cosmopolitan, CXLVI (February, 1959), 58.

clear view of life.<sup>1</sup> The descendants of the Pennsylvania Dutch still retain many of their characteristics. Clothing, transportation, household goods, and even food are still fairly simple and quite functional. Andrew Wyeth grew up in this environment and among these people and the qualities which distinguish the Chadd's Ford community also distinguish a Wyeth painting.

### I. CHILDHOOD ENVIRONMENT

Andrew Wyeth was born in 1917, the youngest of the five children of Newell Converse Wyeth. N. C. Wyeth was a very successful illustrator of childrens' classics such as Treasure Island and The Last of the Mohicans. N. C. Wyeth was no flighty follower of the latest fads in art. He was a sound technician and an accomplished painter-draughtsman. Much of N. C. Wyeth's success as an artist, both financially and artistically, came from his training under Howard Pyle.<sup>2</sup>

The Wyeth household was constantly filled with the stage props which N. C. used in his illustrations, and it was easy for young Andrew, growing up in a house filled with old rifles and pistols, swords, and chests full of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>2</sup>Oliver W. Larkin, Art and Life in America (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1949), p. 257, 332.

soldier and Indian costumes, to develop an imaginative and dreaming nature. N. C. Wyeth entered into every phase of his children's lives; teaching, disciplining, encouraging. He spared nothing to stimulate their imaginations. There were always the best books, music, and toys. Each child had an allotted territory of the basement playroom in which he had free rein. Andrew spent whole days deploying lead soldiers in mock battle array and convulsing in mock death with his leaden casualties.<sup>1</sup> Andrew once stated, "My father was big in his feeling and the way he lived. At Christmas he used to play Santa Claus with electric lights all over him and practically come down the chimney."<sup>2</sup>

## II. EDUCATION AND ART TRAINING

Andrew, unlike his older brother and sisters, did not receive a formal education because of ill health. After three months in first grade his parents removed him from school for good. Although young Andrew received a good education at home (through the use of tutors) the long days of solitude, when his brother and sisters were at school, spent in wandering through the countryside, thinking and dreaming, and playing with numerous toys proved to be a

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Meryman, Andrew Wyeth (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>"Andrew Wyeth," Time, LVIII (July 16, 1961), 62.

much more important education. When Andrew was twelve years old he got some cardboard, scissors, and paint, and created a miniature theater and players in which he acted out Arthur Conan Doyle's 15th Century romance, The White Company. The show, staged singlehandedly, for the family opened the eyes of the elder Wyeth. "Tomorrow morning," stated N. C., "you're coming into the studio."<sup>1</sup>

Wyeth embarked on a rigorous training which could be compared to the apprenticeship that the Renaissance painters went through while learning their craft. Andrew, however, had the incalculable advantage of learning his craft while he was young. N. C. Wyeth drilled his son day after day in the careful, precise art of recording exactly what his eyes saw. He taught Andrew to respect his subject matter and to see that each object possessed dignity no matter how humble it might be. Wyeth states:

My father was a great teacher because he would never talk about how he would paint or do anything. He would always talk about the object and the qualities of that object. He would make you see the depth of the object, not how it should be painted.<sup>2</sup>

Henriette Hurd, oldest sister of Wyeth, has said of N. C.

Wyeth:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>2</sup>"Wyeth's World," Time, LXXX (November 2, 1962), 71.

He would discuss the gradations of the shadow cast by a plaster sphere--how the dark started underneath, like a feather, then became a dusky smoke, and then a kind of starlit double edge. When he finished, you were just so in love with that unutterly prosaic object that you drew it with imagination and love.<sup>1</sup>

Wyeth's father did not teach just how to draw but, more significantly, taught his son how to see. N. C. Wyeth once made this statement when telling Andrew how to see:

When you're doing that form and shadow, remember that what you see is not just a shadow. It is something that will never happen again just like that. Try to get that quality, that fleeting character of a thing.<sup>2</sup>

### III. EARLY WORK

N. C. Wyeth's personality was such, however, that it not only could inspire but it could overwhelm. Andrew Wyeth, while still in his teens and without his father ever knowing it, slipped quietly out from his father's spell and studio and off into the countryside. It was during this time that the young draughtsman began to follow the advice of the poet-painter William Blake: "Look to see the world in a grain of sand."<sup>3</sup> Wyeth's "grain of sand" was and is the area just a couple of miles beyond the Chadd's Ford gas

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<sup>1</sup>Meryman, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>2</sup>"Yankee Painter: Andrew Wyeth," Artist Junior, IX (March, 1968), 3.

<sup>3</sup>"Andrew Wyeth," Time, LXXXII (December 23, 1963), 68.



station and the area near his summer home in Cushing, Maine. He has proven that the microcosm of Chadd's Ford or Cushing is not so intimate a topography that the whole world cannot be gleaned from it.<sup>1</sup>

Wyeth's early work gave little indication of what he was to eventually involve himself with. Besides being an accomplished draughtsman Wyeth was a skillful watercolorist. Wyeth describes his early work as being "very clever, lots of swish and swash."<sup>2</sup> Wyeth held several shows of his watercolors in New York and they were so successful that they all sold out. His watercolors were bold, colorful, and had the quality of freshness about them which seemed natural to the salt, sea, and rural areas he depicted. It was to take a tragic event in Wyeth's life to start him developing into something more than just a clever watercolorist. Wyeth made the following statement about this event:

I think in my life the real turning point--when the emotion thing really became the most important--was the death of my father in 1945. He was killed when a train hit his car at a crossing. We had a wonderful friendship. Of course, he'd been my only teacher, and he was a wonderful, remarkable man. When he died, I was just a clever watercolorist--when he died--well--now I was really on the spot and had this terrific urge to prove that what he had started in me wasn't in vain--to really do something serious and not play around with it, doing

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," Life, LVIII (May 14, 1965), 107.

caricatures of nature. I had a vast gloomy feeling. Fortunately I had always had this great emotion towards the landscape and so, with his death, I seemed to--well--the landscape took on a meaning--the quality of him.<sup>1</sup>

#### IV. LATER STYLE: SUBJECTIVE REALISM

From that point Wyeth's work began to turn inward. Wyeth began to develop a philosophy in his work which looked back on everything that he remembered and experienced. Because of this he had a large reservoir of subject matter from which to draw ideas when he saw something that excited him. Wyeth, in becoming a first class subjective realist, was not satisfied to just record facts. All his paintings were influenced by his own experiences and colored by all the things that happened to him during his life. The background of the portrait of a Negro drifter shows how Wyeth's own feelings and emotions turned the realistic study of Willard Snowden into a subjective look at another human being. The fact that the background of this portrait is as realistic a study as anyone could do of a studio wall is not important. Wyeth's own memories of his lonely past were stirred up by the sight of this drifter and he could not help but give the background meaning based on his experiences.<sup>2</sup> "Objective realism" demands that the artist record

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 107-108.

<sup>2</sup>Meryman, op. cit., p. 23.

only what is seen without emotional interpretations of the objects. Wyeth does not paint this way because the only subjects that stimulate him are those which remind him of his own past, and in painting these subjects, he must relate to his past. In recording the feelings of his past through the use of realistic subject matter, Wyeth naturally has to change certain elements to more effectively describe his emotions. Wyeth once stated:

I'm a very untruthful person and my work is too. That's why people are so often disappointed when they see a place I've painted a picture of. My work is not a depiction of the country particularly. I know they like to make me the American painter of the American scene, like Edward Hopper. Really, I've created my own little world--what I want.<sup>1</sup>

#### V. THOMAS EAKINS: OBJECTIVE REALIST

Thomas Eakins has been cited as being one of the artists who most influenced Wyeth's work.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to see that in Eakins, however, one can see a good example of objective realism rather than the subjective style of realism of Wyeth. Thomas Eakins rarely painted into his work emotional interpretations of what he saw. Eakins painted life as it was without glorifying or detracting from

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," Life, LVIII (May 14, 1965), 109.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 110.

it. He looked for subjects which, in their actual reality, made statements about life which he felt.

If he tried to show the nobility of a man of medical science it would not be through a contrived classical pose. He, being an anatomist of some note, would go into the operating amphitheater and, with the medical students, watch the doctor lecture while performing his operation. Upon seeing the figure of the great doctor slightly turned while talking to his students, Eakins developed the composition. The final painting, "The Gross Clinic" was a dramatic composition, but one which was devised through objective realism. He painted the actual subject in objective detail even to the point of including blood on the hands of the surgeon.

When he commented on life and its hardships by painting the portrait of an elderly woman he did not try to glorify or gloss over her features. He felt that to objectively record every wrinkle and furrow in her brow, to show the sorrow and illness that life brings with it, would more successfully expose his personal feelings about life.<sup>1</sup>

Eakins' search for the factual truths in realism went even beyond this. In his paintings of the Biglen brothers' rowing scenes he carefully plotted oar, boat, and human figure positions through the use of detailed perspective

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<sup>1</sup>Larkin, op. cit., p. 278.

drawings. The horses from his "Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand" were carefully modeled out of clay as was the figure of the diver in "Swimming Hole" before they were painted.<sup>1</sup> This type of careful observation of nature without any personal comment from the artist is common to the style of objective realism that Eakins pursued. This style of realism would not, however, find any place in the brooding, thoughtful, look at nature and people that is characteristic in Wyeth's subjective realism.

#### VI. ANALYSIS OF TWO OF WYETH'S MAJOR WORKS

Wyeth's brand of subjective realism can be more clearly seen by an analysis of two of his major works. "Winter, 1946" was the first major painting effort by Wyeth. "The Patriot," completed in 1964, is a fine example of Wyeth's deep insight into the nature of man.

"Winter, 1946." "Winter, 1946," like much of Wyeth's work is quite simple in subject matter. It is a painting of a large barren hill in late winter. In the left hand corner of the panel one can see the evidence of another field which has been fenced off. Squarely in the center of the panel is a young boy, running down the hill, arms flung out beside him

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

in a gesture of helplessness, and on the ground, a shadow, as dark as death, follows. Wyeth gave the following explanation of the symbolism and meaning of the subjects in this painting:

The first tempera I did after the death of my father was "Winter, 1946." It's of a boy running, almost tumbling down a hill across a strong winter light, with his hand flung wide and a black shadow racing behind him, and bits of snow, and my feeling of being disconnected from everything. It was me, at a loss--that hand drifting in the air was my free soul, groping. Over on the other side of that hill was where my father was killed, and I was sick I'd never painted him. The hill finally became a portrait of him. I spent the whole winter on the painting--it was just the one way I could free this horrible feeling that was in me--and yet there was a great excitement. For the first time in my life, I was painting with a real reason to do it.<sup>1</sup>

The boy that Wyeth painted in "Winter, 1946" was not from Wyeth's imagination. He had, of course, seen the boy running down the hill. This sight served to stimulate the emotions and memories that Wyeth held for his father, and, as Wyeth has stated, these memories were good and they covered a significant part of his life. Wyeth put into the hill all the feelings that he held for his father and that he could never paint into a portrait done from memory. Since Wyeth had a love of nature it was an obvious choice in searching for subject matter that could revive these

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," Life, LVIII (May 14, 1965), 107.

feelings.<sup>1</sup> Although Wyeth made statements about very personal feelings through symbolic subject matter the painting has such a universal quality about it that almost anyone can appreciate it. Appreciation is evident especially if they have ever come to that point in life when they have felt that they were groping for a new direction. In realizing this fact one can see universal validity in "Winter, 1946."

Explanation of egg-tempera technique. Wyeth paints with a medium that dates back to pre-Renaissance times. The technique of egg-tempera painting is very slow and time consuming; and it requires a highly skilled and meticulous hand to use it successfully. The egg yolk, when separated from the white, has an extremely tough adhesive quality and when mixed with water and dry pigment becomes permanent. Egg-tempera is most generally painted on a wooden panel (usually masonite) which has received several coats of gesso.<sup>2</sup> Since the color is laid on very painstakingly, stroke by stroke, it will permit none of the "slick tricks" that oil painting does. It is, however, unparalleled for its percision and for the unobtrusive quality of creating the sensation of

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," Life, LVIII (May 14, 1965), 107.

<sup>2</sup>Ralph Mayer, The Artist's Handbook of Material and Techniques (Revised edition; New York: The Viking Press, 1957), p. 231-245.

light and air. Wyeth, in talking with E. P. Richardson, former Director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, said, "Look at the blue color of that jacket hanging on the wall. Nothing else can do the air within that shadow so well as tempera."<sup>1</sup> The technique that Wyeth uses seems to be a complete contradiction of his nature which is quite impulsive and expressionistic. Wyeth states:

Those immaculately painted things--you'd think I was a mathematician. Truth is, I use tempera partly because its such a dull medium--those minute strokes put a brake on my real nature--messiness. My wild side that's really me comes out in my watercolors.<sup>2</sup>

Wyeth may work for months on a painting and then completely paint it out and start over again. In one landscape "Brown Swiss" he had virtually completed the painting when a sudden whim struck him. He picked up a bowl of yellow ochre pigment and completely painted over the surface. He later completely reworked and finished the painting. Wyeth says:

I do wild things. If someone were to see me, they'd think I was nuts, ruining it. Then I haul it back in, bring the forms and bones to reality and shapes--refine it. If it's all just a placid development to hell with that. You'll get a normal, regular painting.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>E. P. Richardson, "Andrew Wyeth, An Atlantic Portrait," The Atlantic, CCXIII (June 1964), 71.

<sup>2</sup>Meryman, op. cit., 106.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 107.



"The Patriot." When Wyeth, in 1960, conceived the idea for the painting of "The Patriot" it was in a way in which many of his ideas are conceived.

Four years ago he was marshal in a parade near Thomaston, Maine. I remember his amazing figure, something about the way he walked, his build, this feeling of very erect. He had on a dark blue uniform of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and a little hat. I was struck by him, not to paint--but it stayed with me. Then last summer I was doing a watercolor near his house and he came by and bent over--and that face--that stayed with me--and at his saw mill, the way he would reach in with his hand and pull up the logs. Honestly, I don't know what it was--something very elusive made me ask him to pose. And it wasn't until later that I began wondering if he had a First World War uniform. The whole thing began to build in my mind--that bald head.<sup>1</sup>

In studying the portrait of Ralph Cline one might feel that it is rather superficial and sentimental to have an old man dress up in his World War I uniform and then paint his portrait. In the case of Wyeth it is possible to see that the study of this man goes far beyond this as does the studies he makes of all his subjects. He states:

You see, I don't say, "Well, now I'm going to go out and find something to paint." To hell with that. You might just as well stay at home and have a good glass of whiskey. Really, I just walk a great deal over the countryside. I try to leave myself very blank--a kind of a sounding board, all the time very open to catch a vibration, a tone from something or somebody--like Ralph Cline. Every so often I'll catch, out of the corner of my eye, off balance, a flash impression of something--a spark of excitement. If it holds in my memory, maybe weeks or even years later, very suddenly--maybe even walking down a street in New York City--that thing will dawn on me. Just like

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," Life, LVIII (May 14, 1965), 108.

that, then the idea enriches in my mind and I embellish it maybe for weeks. When I begin to sense something, like with Ralph Cline, the hair begins to raise on the back of my neck. And nothing can stop me from doing it. I can't go anywhere, do anything but grab that thing.<sup>1</sup>

Many memories, past experiences, and feelings of Wyeth were excited and renewed when he first saw Ralph Cline in the Veterans of Foreign Wars parade. After allowing the first impressions to sink in, after thinking and dreaming about what he had seen, Wyeth started the portrait. Wyeth states:

You see, alot of my pictures--"The Patriot" for instance--come from dreaming about my past experiences. As a child I loved toy soldiers, had an enormous collection. And I used to go to my father's studio and he'd saved the newspapers of the First World War--the brown sections, the rotogravure--and I used to pour over those as a little child. I can remember the smell of that newspaper, the pictures of General Pershing, Frank Luke, or Rickenbacker or Leonard Wood, or Captain Whittlesy of the Lost Battalion, or even the tunic of the man who was killed in Serbia at the start of the War. That could be his tunic Ralph has on. All that faded into the picture I wanted to paint--my truth behind the fact.<sup>2</sup>

The figure of Ralph Cline was not the only area of the painting that held special meaning to Wyeth. The background was not painted just to show off the light color on Ralph's bald head. He painted into it all of the thunder and noise of the Meuse-Argonne. The background became the

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," Life, LVIII (May 14, 1969), 108.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 107.

dirt and mud of the trenches in which Cline stood as well as the tobacco stain and sweat from the sawmill which Cline owns and runs. The background became Wyeth's own personal world in which he dreamed of all of his past. Even the strange peak on Cline's bald head held a special meaning for Wyeth when he painted it. He says:

I kept thinking about that bald head, that round oval while I was driving my car, lying in bed. In that curve along the top of that head was the essence, really, of what excited me. It was the whole beginning of that painting. I started with just tone--nothing but tone--just dark skin burnished from the weather and, where his hat always was, the bald light top, which could be the head of the American bald Eagle.<sup>1</sup>

In the following comment by Wyeth one understands that he has also made references, in "The Patriot," to his geographical environment. He says:

I don't paint these hills around Chadd's Ford because they're better than the hills someplace else. It's that I was born here, lived here--things have a meaning for me. I don't go to Maine particularly because of the salt, air or the water. In fact, I like Maine in spite of its scenery. There's lots of cornball in that state you have to go through--boats, old fishermen, and shacks with swayback roofs. I hate all that.

You wouldn't say that the painting of "The Patriot" is particularly a painting of Maine. And yet, I think I've come closest to getting the true meaning of the way I feel about Maine in that picture--almost by the smell of it. There's something very basic about the country there, it has an austere quality--very exciting--the quietness, the freedom. I like it because it has an edge--like Ralph Cline.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," Life, LVIII (May 14, 1965), 111.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 112.

Wyeth may see and relive many past personal experiences within the frame of his painting, but to a viewer, the painting has taken on a much wider, more meaningful, more universal quality. The elderly man, dressed up in his World War I uniform, is not just a portrait of one old man; he represents the average American worker who will fight and die for what is his when he believes it is being threatened. Ralph Cline sums up the quality of universality that Wyeth has achieved in the following statement:

Andy came over here, I think it was on a Saturday, and asked me if I'd pose for him and I gave it a quick think and said when do we start? He says tomorrow morning. I did think maybe he was going to do me like some old Maine character in my hat and overalls, and I almost said no. I'm awful glad I didn't. When you stop to think that he's chosen me to represent the rank and file of the American soldiers, it's almost more than I can stand.<sup>1</sup>

#### X. UNIVERSAL VALIDITY IN WYETH'S PAINTINGS

Wyeth looks for and finds subjects which remind him of all his past experiences but from a small geographical area and from one individual's experiences come paintings that make universal statements about all of the pasts of all of the people who view them. Wyeth has told of receiving many letters from people who, when viewing a painting by him, relive their own past through some memory. One woman

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," Life, LVIII (May 14, 1965), 123.

wrote, "The painting with the lace curtains blowing in the wind from the sea reminds me of a time when I was small and sick in bed, and that was the way the window curtains looked then." Another stated in her letter; "I remember my mother used to sit in that same position," when she viewed the painting "Christina Olson."<sup>1</sup> Virtually every work of Wyeth's can be applied to the past experiences of the viewer. In this sense Wyeth's work, whether he tries to or not, achieves universal validity as painting.

Andrew Wyeth's work and his philosophy of art can be best summed up by the following statement:

I think that one's art goes only as far and as deep as one's love goes. I see no reason for painting but that. If I have anything to offer it is my emotional contact with the place where I live and the people I do.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Gehman, "Andrew Wyeth," Cosmopolitan, CXLVI (February, 1959), 64.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," Life, LVIII (May 14, 1965), 3.

### CHAPTER III

#### ANALYSIS OF THE THREE THESIS PAINTINGS

If an artist is to successfully make meaningful statements in his paintings he must be deeply and personally involved with the subject matter. Without this emotional involvement his work will have no more meaning than a casual snapshot. An artist may paint subjects from a large metropolitan area because he has lived there and has become emotionally involved with them. Whether he tries to show the impersonality of the city or some other of its aspects, he does so because of his emotional attachment to it. Another artist may spend his time making comments on society in the hopes of dramatically exposing those things he feels to be lacking in it. An artist may have an emotional attachment to a certain geographical section of the country and thus his work will contain elements of nature that are peculiar to that region. A photograph of that area would provide no more than a superficial study of its topography. The artist, however, has had his personality formed, in some manner, by this region and this will tend to influence what he paints. Rather than being coldly objective about what he sees, his emotions will cause him to make a subjective statement about the subject. As seen in the previous chapter, Andrew Wyeth is this type of artist.

Wyeth grew up in a small section of the country and

has lived there all of his life. Whatever he has painted has been influenced by his feelings for this particular environment. Although his subjects are from a small geographical section of the country and the people he paints, his close friends, the final results are universal in their application to man and nature. Even though Wyeth has been offered large sums of money by people who want him to paint their section of the country he constantly turns them down because he feels that he cannot paint something that he does not have an emotional attachment for.

#### I. ARTIST'S GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

The artist has lived all of his life in a small section of the Midwest: Central Iowa. Before moving to Des Moines at the age of seventeen, he lived in a small central Iowa town. Wyeth has said that an artist develops most of his ideas, feelings, and emotions between the ages of six and sixteen. Most of the impressions of rural Iowa were formed during this age period in the small town which had a predominate rural environment. Rather than change the artist's impressions, the move to a much larger city served to sharpen the contrast between rural and city environments.

People are, in terms of human nature, basically the same. It is the environment and background in which they

were raised which molds them into the diverse characters they become. The farmer in central Iowa is different from the bookkeeper in Des Moines, not so much because they differ as humans, but because their environment demands different responses to life.

## II. CHILDHOOD ENVIRONMENT

The people that populate rural Iowa are generally conservative in all facets of their life: social, religious, moral and political. Keeping abreast of the latest fads, styles of clothing, and material goods are not as important to these people as they are to those who live in urban areas. The rural Iowa culture is one that is still fairly simple and easy going. Because of this, one is given a clear view of both people and life. There is no attempt to imply that this culture is the best for the whole of society, but the artist, like Wyeth, feels that since he grew up in this area, knows it well, and has an emotional attachment for it, it offers him a valid resource from which to draw subject matter.

## III. EXPLANATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

The artist has taken a look at his own past, and the general society from which he came through the use of subject matter that he sees and responds to today. The



subject matter is not the overworked landscapes that is often seen in paintings dealing with the rural Midwest. Rather, it is based on people who have been shaped by the environment and culture of rural Iowa. What is seen today, in these people and their reactions to life, serves to remind him of his own roots in the rural environment. Social, cultural, and economic backgrounds serve to influence the final subjective statement. The people seen today are the stimuli by which he is able to paint about his past. The paintings are personal reflections of life based on the experiences of one person. But the real validity of them is that they symbolically, through subjective realism, represent the culture and environment of a whole segment of our society.

Each one of the series of three paintings depict an individual or group of people. What the person is doing, what they are wearing, and the particular place that they happen to be, all have some significance to his conception of rural Iowa. The subjects of the paintings also become symbols for the experiences of the artist's past. Each painting symbolizes an aspect of the artist's life and how it was shaped by the unique characteristics of the rural culture.

The painting "Sunday Afternoon" shown in figure 1 is, in reality, the artist's son, but in the picture the artist

has captured his own childhood and all features that were socially and religiously inherent in it on a Sunday afternoon.

The painting "Iowa" shown in Figure 2 is a look at the type of person that can be classified as being typical of rural Iowa. It becomes a study of the characteristics and habits of people who react to particular situations in which their environment has placed them.

The painting of "The Problem" shown in Figure 3 is a study of the artist's father but it symbolizes more than that. It is a composite and, in a sense, a glorification of the type of working man that is common to his environment.

#### IV. ANALYSIS OF "SUNDAY AFTERNOON"

The painting, "Sunday Afternoon," depicts the artist's son peering out a window while standing on a davenport. It consists of simple subject matter and muted tones of warm grays and browns with little other color. On the surface, it seems to be nothing more than an illustration of a small boy. Closer study reveals that the artist has worked toward two objectives: (1) He looks at his own childhood; and (2) he has made a subjective study of the cultural, social, and religious characteristics that are common to the environment in which he grew up. These things are captured through subjective realism in one



Figure 1. "Sunday Afternoon" by L. Douglas Nicolet.

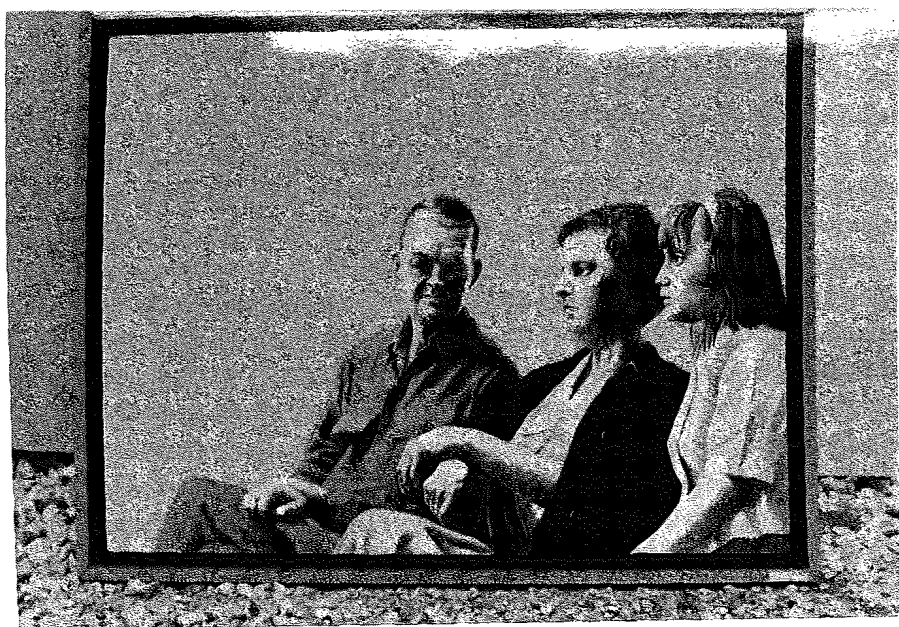


Figure 2. "Iowa" by L. Douglas Nicolet.

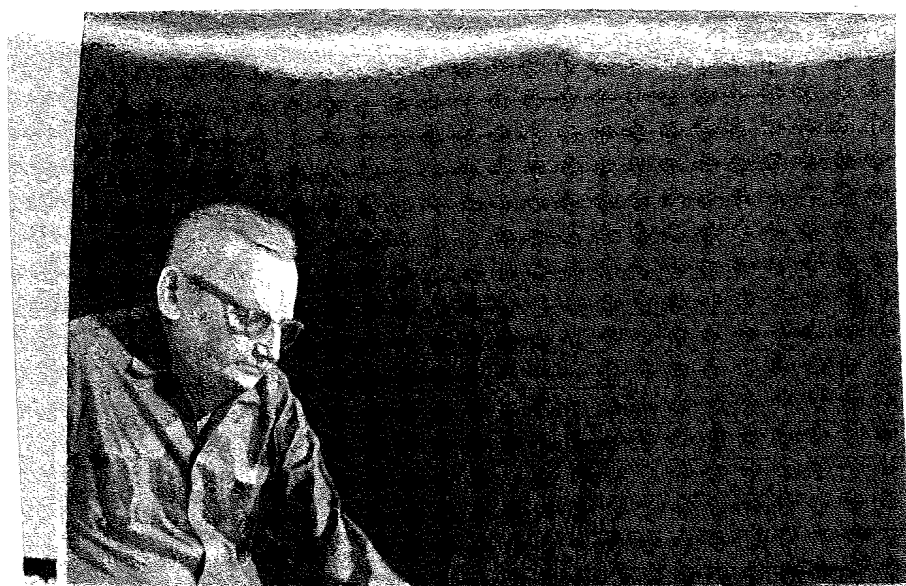


Figure 3. "The Problem" by L. Douglas Nicolet.

instant of time as his boy leans to look out of a window at some fleeting object.

Influence of artist's religious background. The artist grew up in a very conservative religious atmosphere. It was so conservative, in fact, that on Sunday, other than going to church, the family could engage in no work and could not pursue any type of entertainment. Sunday was to be a day of quiet meditation and rest. To an energetic young child, this became a day filled with boredom. The overall attitude of the town was similar. This was not always because of a particular religious conviction; many times it was because of a lack of entertainment facilities which were financially able to survive in the small town.

These facts have been suggested through subjective realism. The starkness of the subject and the room the boy is in subjectively suggest the conservative religious atmosphere under which the artist was raised.

Religious and social environments common to rural Iowa. Although the Midwest rural area, as a whole, was not characterized by a religious nature as conservative as that of the artist's family, the church did play an important role in the social life of the community. Many rural families came to church on Sunday for socializing as well as religion. During the busy farming season these

people had little time to do their socializing except on Sunday.

In the small rural town, Wednesday night was reserved for church and youth activities. School activities were not scheduled on Wednesday night because of the obvious interference. Although the religious services were not the most important reason for children attending church it served as a central location in which they were able to socialize with each other. The social aspect of the church played an important role in the rural Iowan culture.

Color symbolism. The pose of the boy becomes a subjective symbol of the loneliness and dreaminess which are similar to the feelings the artist has experienced. The colors of the painting were purposely kept from being harsh to achieve a quiet feeling. Anything that might suggest activity or excitement has been intentionally left out to subjectively suggest the boredom and loneliness that was common place to a young boy on a Sunday afternoon in a rural Iowa environment.

The attitude of the pose and the colors in general also suggest the extreme solitude that one can find in the small rural community. This sense of solitude can seldom be found anywhere else but in rural areas such as where the artist lived. To one raised in a rural environment

the noise, clamour, and smells of the large metropolitan area serve to deaden the spirit. There is real serenity and beauty in being in a small town on a late summer evening and hearing the stillness and yet the noisiness of nature without the intrusion of other sounds.

Subject matter symbolism. The rolling quality of the folds in his boy's pant legs suggest, in some measure, the quality of the rolling farm land that is common to Iowa. There are also feelings in these folds that express the newly plowed and disced fields waiting their spring planting.

The white on the boy's shirt is even brighter because of the contrasting shadows suggesting not only the freshness of the air but also the brightness of a summer sky.

Socio-economic background of rural Iowa. In the painting "Sunday Afternoon," comments have been made about the social and economic environment of the rural Midwest. In this case, the artist's son becomes the symbol by which the artist remembers his own social and economic past. The painting achieves universal validity because a large number of the people, in the rural Midwest, were socially and economically on the same level as that of the artist's family.

Economically, the artist's family was in the lower middle class bracket. His father was a partsman at a local automobile dealership. Since the pay was poor the family



had to get along without many material products that more money could have provided.

This lack of affluence in the family also limited the number of close friends that the artist had. He found, however, that his imagination could fill the void left by the lack of companionship.

Family relationships with brothers and sisters were also quite limited. The artist had no sisters and his only brother, who was four years older, possessed interests which were completely opposite with those of the artist. Due to the father's working schedule there was little time left for him to have recreation with the family, and summer vacations were out because of the obvious inherent financial burdens. These social and economic circumstances forced the artist to become even more alone as he grew older.

The lack of decorative qualities and bright colors in "Sunday Afternoon" suggest the sparseness of material wealth during the artist's childhood. The colors are, however, not drab or lonely. The gray background is a warm and comfortable color as is the brown used in the sofa. The artist has purposely used these colors in relating to the fact that the parents, though financially poor and rather introspective, never allowed the artist and his brother to feel that there was a lack of concern about them. They always knew that their parents were doing their

utmost to provide a good home environment. The color scheme was used to convey these feelings.

Universality of "Sunday Afternoon." Many families in the Midwest were socially and financially at the same level as that of the artist's family. These rural families, because of farming, were able to do little socializing during the working seasons. Farming is hard work that seldom gives high financial rewards. Many families are able to do little more than provide the basic necessities of life for their children. Because this life demands a very simple, direct, and hard working individual it becomes rather easy to get a clear view of the courage and hardships produced in such an environment. The artist, through a subjective look at his child, is in a sense, paying tribute to a whole segment of the rural Iowa population.

#### V. ANALYSIS OF "IOWA"

The second in the series of paintings, "Iowa," is an in depth study of some of the problems that the rural environment presents to its inhabitants. It is a sympathetic look at a rural family and a specific problem. The conclusions drawn from the painting are universally applicable to many of the people that live in this region. The painting consists of simple subject matter; a family, composed of a man, woman, and a young girl sitting in a

room. The painting does not define any specific area or building because these facts are of little importance to the total statement. It is the story of the family which is of prime importance. He feels that it symbolizes a typical problem that is common to these people.

Explanation of subject matter. The family lives in a small south central Iowa town. The man farms on an acreage near the town and his wife supplements their income by working in a restaurant. Their daughter is a sophomore in the community high school.

Although the problem is, at first, humorous it comes to a rather unhappy conclusion. The high school that the girl attends maintains a very strict dress and appearance code. The students' hair must be of acceptable lengths and if they wear bangs, they must also conform to certain standard lengths which is the width of one of the principal's fingers above the eyebrows.

The conservative dress code of the school became the root of the family's problem. The girl let her bangs grow too long and, when the principal found out he told her that she could not continue to attend school until the length of her bangs met with the rule of the established dress code. The girl refused. She was suspended. In refusing to comply with this ruling, the family under the direction of the Iowa Civil Liberties Union, took the case to court. The

girl, during the court proceedings, lost over three months of schooling and the family's landlord, under pressure from community leaders, told them that he would not be able to continue to lease the farm to them. The girl is now faced with the choice of starting her high school education over or paying some three hundred dollars in tuition to make up the lost class time. In addition to all of these problems, during the court proceedings the girl's father became ill and is now unable to carry on the necessary physical labor that farming requires.

The artist has seen both humor and pathos in this problem. One inch of hair caused two intelligent lawyers, who spent much time and money in preparing for their profession, three months of rather useless arguing about a school rule and a students' obligation to abide by it. The final results are: a family intimidated because they fought against something that they didn't believe in, a community made to look silly in the eyes of surrounding communities, and a man losing his health. These results are far more pathetic than they are humorous.

The artist felt that the school was wrong in trying to enforce dress and appearance codes that have no relevance to modern day schools and youth. The family was put in a quiet, formal pose to suggest his sympathetic feeling toward them.

Color symbolism. The colors used in this painting are quite important to the final statement. The basic background color is a warm, light, yellow ochre. The artist has seen several ideas symbolized in this color. It becomes a symbol of agriculture and, in this sense, states that the people in the painting are farmers. The artist remembers the times that he worked in fields, helping his relatives on hot Iowa summer days. The corn, and wheat, and the hot, humid weather that cause them to grow are all symbolized in the ochre colored background. It is a reflection of the environment the artist grew up in as well as a remembrance of his personal past. The plainness and simplicity of the color is a direct allusion to the plainness and simplicity of rural Iowa and its people.

The color of the clothing also holds subjective significance to the idea evoked in the painting. The man was portrayed in simple green work clothing. He, like many rural Iowan men, was nothing more than a common working man. However, the quiet pose and the use of soft color suggest sympathy for him and there is also a feeling of strength in this man and even in the face of this seemingly ridiculous problem, he retains his dignity.

Figure symbolism. The most powerful figure, both in color and in form, is the central figure; the mother.

She was the driving force behind the court suit and, as in many rural families, tends to run the household. This, the artist has suggested by the use of the dark color in her coat and in the way she has stubbornly crossed her hands and set herself in the chair. She looks forward with an air of determination while her husband gives her a rather forlorn look as though wishing that she would release him to his farm environment; the environment in which he would be more at ease.

The girl sits next to the mother in the corner of the painting. Though she is the cause of "The Problem" she is virtually crowded off of the composition. She is leaning forward as if unsure of herself and in need of guidance from her mother. The artist has painted into her face the look of one with average intelligence and, like her mother, above average stubbornness. The fact that she seems in an awkward position suggests that, like many rural youth, she feels and is out of place in the more formal and urban surroundings.

Rural human nature symbolized through figures. The artist, in his relationship with his own rural relatives, has found another characteristic which is dominant in rural people. When one of these people feel that their opinion about a subject is correct it is virtually impossible to

get them to change their mind. The farmer who owns his land, large or small, is his own boss and the decisions that he makes about farming will spell success or failure for him. This situation develops a very independent nature in these people and an independent person who is accustomed to making his own decisions and then living by them can be a stubborn person to deal with.

The artist has suggested this in the features of the woman. She will carry the issue of her daughter's hair to the supreme court, if necessary, in order to prove that she is right. Her face is set in a mask of determination. The father acts as though he feels that, in reality, what is happening to his family is rather silly. The daughter has the look on her face of a child who really doesn't understand how involved and troublesome a problem her long hair has become.

Summary. On one side of this problem is a school board which is rural in composition and conservative in nature which takes a dim view of the fads and social trends that its young people tend to develop. On the other side is a rural Iowa family who are convinced that it is the right of their daughter, as an American Citizen, to wear her hair any way she chooses. Since the family was convinced that it was right it would not let any group of

individuals dictate their will to it. Even though the artist does not feel that either party was blameless in this problem he enjoys the idea that only in a rather unsophisticated culture such as rural Iowa could one encounter such an insignificant problem which would cause so much commotion. In this sense, the problem itself becomes a symbol, of the unsophisticated nature of the Iowa rural environment.

## VI. ANALYSIS OF "THE PROBLEM"

Another phase of those who comprise the rural Midwest environment has been studied in the painting of "The Problem." The subject is the artist's father, seen engrossed in the task of repairing a common household object. In a more universal sense, the artist is paying tribute to a large segment of common working men who populate the rural environment. This man has never done anything in his life that would be considered great enough to record in history books and will never be a wealthy man. But he has worked all of his life to make an honest living, has treated his family with love and respect, and taught his sons that they should do the same. He is a God fearing man who has a patriotic love for his country and, the artist senses, in the painting, that he becomes a symbol for all the other common working men who live in the rural environment. He



feels that the rank and file of ordinary working men possess a nobility that the owner of a huge corporation seldom has. The rural Iowan is characterized not only by his independence but also by the pride he has in his work. His work may never be as important as that of a corporate executive but the important thing is that even the smallest of rural business men or farmers achieve a dignity in their work because they have a sense of pride and usefulness in what they do.

A wealthy executive may live in the most beautiful of surroundings and may be admired and looked up to by many people, but this same man will become rather uncomfortable if the garbage collector forgets him for a few weeks or the delivery boy forgets to bring the laundry to him or the farmer quits producing food for him to eat. The artist feels that this is the dignity of common working men like his father. The jobs that they perform are as necessary to the country as that of corporation executives. Although it takes highly skilled and intelligent men to administer the business of huge corporations today, they could not function if thousands of common working men were not available to supply the necessary physical labor to operate them. The artist sees this as a quality that is applicable not only to working men in Iowa but also applicable to working men in the United States.

Importance of painting style in relation to subject matter. The dignity and nobility that the artist sees in his father, as a symbol of the common man, is so important to him that he feels to abstract any part of the realistic approach to the portrait would be doing a disservice to the subject. With each of the drybrushed strokes applied to the board the artist senses the pride that the people he is portraying have as they go about their daily work. It was felt that the subject was far too important to paint in any style other than subjective realism.

Subject matter. The subject matter of this painting is the simplest of the series. It is done this way to give total recognition to the man because other details would only detract from this idea. The artist has allowed only enough of the background to show so that the viewer will see that his father is in a room. What he is doing, where he is, or the time of day, is unimportant to the total idea being expressed. The artist has painted his father with his forehead wrinkled in concentration. It is only important that the viewer realize that this complete concentration on a problem is the one real and important quality that this common man imparts to his work. Whatever it is that he does, he will be involved with it until it is finished correctly.

The artist has purposely left out any intimation of

the particular thing that his father is working on. He wants the viewer to be completely engrossed in watching the man at work, not in the effects of what he is doing. The significance of this man is not involved with the job that he performs, but the involvement is in how the job is performed.

## VII. STYLE AND MEDIUM USED IN THESIS PAINTINGS

The style of subjective realism used is true in the series of paintings and is one in which the artist feels totally self confident. He feels that when a particular idea appeals to him enough to paint it, he can best describe his ideas and feelings through realism. The artist, however, does not copy nature: he is being subjective about all that he sees and then recording those subjective feelings in a realistic manner.

The medium used in all of the paintings is acrylic tempera. It is a waterbase medium that dries rapidly and permanently. It has some of the qualities of egg-tempera although the resulting surface texture is not quite as dry or precise as that of the egg-tempera medium. The polymer pigment is very transparent when used thinly, as in drybrush, and colors tend to glow from beneath successive coats. Extreme realism can be achieved by either a cross hatch method of brush strokes or many coats of drybrush. Colors

can be gradually changed in hue and intensity through these methods, and the final results are very desirable. This medium requires some skill in mastering and an unlimited amount of patience.<sup>1</sup> The series of three paintings, though individually not large, represents some eight months of steady work which would involve close to two hundred and fifty hours of time. Before the paint was applied a very detailed study of the subject was drawn on the panel and completely shaded. Areas of the painting were changed as the work progressed, however, the final result was very close to the original drawing.

#### VIII. METHODS EMPLOYED IN THESIS PAINTINGS

The artist had to rely on photographs and rapid watercolor sketches for help in the preliminary drawings. Once the painting was started, however, he worked from life or his imagination. The family in "Iowa" was drawn originally from a newspaper photograph. The painting was done from his imagination. The colors were purely subjective and were used as the artist felt they would best reflect his personal feelings about the subject. The paintings "Sunday Afternoon" and "The Problem" were drawn from life and painted from a combination of life poses and imagination.

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<sup>1</sup>Ralph Mayer, The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques (Revised edition; New York: The Viking Press, 1957), p. 204-210.

The artist's subjective realism obviously demanded that certain objects or colors be left out of the paintings or changed in order to achieve the desired effects in the work.

#### IX. SUMMARY OF THE THESIS PAINTING SERIES

Rural Iowa, with its relatively simple culture and quiet pace of living, holds much meaning and validity as subject matter for the artist. He will never be able to exhaust all of its possibilities as subject matter.

The success of this series of paintings is, in some measure, related to how successfully they convey the feelings and emotions of the artist to his viewers. He feels that he has clearly defined the culture and environment in which he was raised and has successfully stated those meanings that it holds for him and therefore it is now up to the viewer to draw conclusions for himself. The viewer, like the artist, must take a subjective look at the paintings to understand the emotional content and validity of them.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

It has been the artist's contention that he could, through a specific style of painting, make valid statements about his own past and, in so doing, recall basic qualities of the environment from which he came.

The artist completed a series of three polymer tempera paintings. Each of these paintings depicted a sight he had viewed recently and which symbolized his own past as well as the general rural environment from which he came. The artist defended his use of subject matter and painting style by analyzing the works of the artist Andrew Wyeth.

The specific style that he used was "subjective realism." This means that although the artist painted the subject matter realistically he changed certain objects, colors, or compositions in order to more clearly symbolize his reasons for creating the painting.

The artist concluded that after much search and study he had found a style of painting in subjective realism which was and is well suited to the temperament of the artist. He also found that subjective realism presents the people and culture of rural Iowa in a fresh and valid manner.

The validity of this series of paintings relate to the fact that, from the memory of one individual, a statement

has been made about a large group of people and the environment in which they live.

The particular style of subjective realism, having been proved to be valid, will be further pursued in relation to the Iowa scene. It is quite possible that eventually the artist will find that the subjects he sees in the city today are valid not only as symbols of his past but as subject matter in themselves.

Recommendations. The rural Iowan environment offers much to the artist in terms of subject matter possibilities. Many things that he views today remind him directly of his heritage in the rural scene. He feels that this offers so many possibilities for subject matter that he must spend much more time exploring it.

If the time comes that the rural scene fails to offer, any longer, adequate stimulation for him, he will, of course, look elsewhere for inspiration. He is, however, sure of one thing: whatever subjects he paints will always be influenced in some way by the rural heritage which has formed such a large part of his personality.

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